

**Russia's Crumbling Tactical Nuclear
Weapons Complex:
An Opportunity for Arms Control**

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and

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Executive Summary	ix
Introduction	1
A View From the West	3
Current Nuclear Policies	3
Nuclear Disarmament Efforts	4
The View Toward Russia	5
Physical and Technical Security	7
Pre-Delegation and De-Escalation	9
Nuclear Dependency in Conventional Contingencies	10
Stockpile Consolidation and Stewardship Efforts	12
Demoralized Personnel and Internal Security Problems	13
A Possible Solution: An Air-Delivered Nuclear Forces Regime	15
Preconditions for Engagement	18
Multi-Phased Approach	19
Technical Hurdles: Verification, Detection, and Numbers	23
<i>Verified Elimination of Nuclear Weapons</i>	23
<i>Detecting Nuclear Warheads</i>	24
<i>The Original Baseline Warhead Number</i>	25
Political Challenges: France	26
Legal Obstacles: The START Treaties	27
Russian Motives and the 1991 Initiative	28
Conclusion: An ANF Regime and Atlantic Security	31
Endnotes	37

FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this twelfth volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). This monograph represents the results of research conducted during fiscal year 1996 under the sponsorship of a grant from INSS.

This paper presents a novel response to the many security challenges posed by Russian perceptions of the continuing utility of their non-strategic nuclear forces and the related problem of “loose nucs” within the Russian Federation. The authors develop an air-delivered nuclear forces arms control regime and argue that eliminating this class of weapons would be one of the best ways to address these challenges. As the authors point out, despite its many benefits, such a regime would potentially face strong opposition due to its broad sweep, as well as issues such as the requirement for the United States to eliminate the airbreathing leg of the triad. Significantly, the authors bolster the case for the political acceptability of such a regime by uncovering evidence that the Soviets were considering advancing a similar proposal in 1991. However, the Soviet proposal was overtaken by the August 1991 *coup* attempt and President George Bush’s unilateral nuclear initiatives that September.

Many readers will no doubt disagree with this proposal and its implications for the US nuclear triad. Nonetheless, the authors’ suggestions deserve careful scrutiny because they refocus attention on non-strategic nuclear forces—arguably the largest and most dangerous dimension of the post-Cold War nuclear overhang. In that regard, this paper serves as a logical successor to the discussion in *INSS Occasional Paper 10* on the dangers of criminality and weapons proliferation in Russia. INSS is pleased to offer Lambert and Miller’s fresh ideas for public debate.

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PETER L. HAYS, Lt Colonel, USAF
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As politicians and policy makers trumpet the successes of strategic reductions and the achievements of the START agreements, Russia has increasingly focused on a rhetorical and doctrinal campaign to enhance the credibility of nuclear war-fighting threats by legitimizing theater or tactical nuclear systems. There is one certainty about the state of Russian nuclear weapons, both strategic and non-strategic: the Russian Federation is convinced that, ultimately, its security rests upon these weapons, and it has therefore attempted to shield both the personnel and the hardware from the effects of the military rollback. In addition, because Russian military planners appreciate the political deterrent value of nuclear weapons as well as their war-fighting applications, the military and scientific elite continues to invest in their operational future. Yet there seems to be substantial opportunity for security breaches, theft, and system compromise in the nuclear weapons complex of the Russian Federation today.

While the motives of strategic arms control advocates may be admirable, the notion that the two largest possessors of nuclear weapons could speedily draw down their arsenals to under 2000 warheads, as a START III regime suggests, is misguided. Such an idea highlights a bias toward the apex of the nuclear weapons pyramid—the strategic nuclear forces—and ignores the thousands of so-called tactical nuclear weapons possessed by both states. The very real threat associated with Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal—possible operational use, loss of central control, and the theft or diversion of intact nuclear weapons—should impel those with genuine concerns to redirect their efforts toward the lower end of the nuclear weapons spectrum. Unlike strategic systems which have been the subject of years of negotiations, treaties, and transparency regimes, these tactical systems have been largely ignored by both

the official as well as the activist community. However, while one can envision the US and Russia making further reductions to existing strategic arsenals, deep cuts in tactical systems would require a major redirection in current arms control efforts.

The arms control proposal presented in this paper incorporates a regime that would address this much larger and potentially more dangerous class of weapons. A regime calling for the elimination of air-delivered tactical nuclear weapons may prove to be a useful model for reinvigorating the stalled process of nuclear arms reductions, while simultaneously promoting US, European, and Russian national security interests. Because this would create a global ban on air delivered nuclear weapons, it would also eliminate one leg of the US strategic nuclear triad, and American bombers could convert to a strictly conventional role. This proposal, while controversial, is not strictly original; indeed, the Soviet Union had a similar proposal ready for delivery to the United States in 1991, but the effort was overtaken by President Bush's unilateral tactical nuclear reductions that fall. The authors here present details from that Soviet proposal for the first time.

There are many good reasons why the United States should move toward a smaller nuclear force posture. This means reducing nuclear weapons in general, and Russian air-delivered nuclear weapons in particular. It is in the security interests of the democracies of Europe and North America to address concerns regarding the nuclear weapons program of the Russian Federation. While US nonstrategic nuclear forces still have a role in Europe today, their perceived value and utility are gradually fading, at least in the eyes of some observers. In fact, their final utility may be their role as bargaining chips to induce the Russian Federation to eliminate entirely this category of weapons.

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